

## HIV/AIDS: What Parents Need to Know

**Does it seem like your child knows more about HIV/AIDS than you do?** Although children learn about AIDS in school and from their friends, parents have a very important job in helping their children really understand AIDS and how not to get it.

One of the most important things you can do is to make your values about sex clear to your children.

- Talk with them about your expectations for them. Being able to talk with your child about HIV/AIDS means you need to be comfortable talking about sexuality. If this is hard for you, know that it's hard for nearly all parents. To get some help,
  - Ask your librarian for help
  - Google SIECUS and Search for "For Parents"
  - Click on [www.cdc.gov/parents/](http://www.cdc.gov/parents/) Centers for Disease Control & Prevention
- You can use a TV commercial or a poster as a starting point to talk about HIV/AIDS with your child. Find out what he or she knows. "What have you heard? What do you think AIDS is?"

### **Sexual activity and sharing needles to inject drugs put teens at special risk for HIV/AIDS.**

Although some teens are abstaining from sexual activity, many are not. Abstinence is the only way to completely avoid sexually transmitted AIDS.

Although teens may know "the facts" about HIV/AIDS, they often believe that it can't happen to them. Humorously, it is sometimes said that teens have the "3 I's." They think they are (1) invincible, (2) immortal and (3) infertile.

### **AIDS is preventable...Education is the key!**

#### **AIDS is a serious disease, and we do not have a cure.**

The only way to stop AIDS from spreading is by teaching people to protect themselves. Anyone who practices unsafe sex is at risk for the disease.

The Children's Defense Fund suggests these guidelines for helping youth learn about AIDS.

#### **Young elementary school age children can have many fears.**

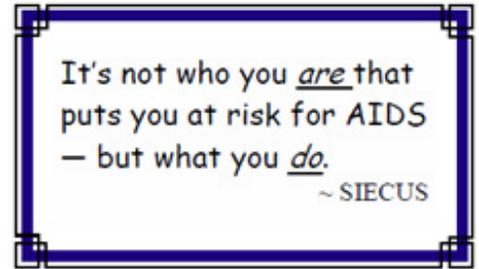
- Encourage them to talk about their feelings.
- Help them learn the simple, basic facts about AIDS.
- Help them set aside irrational fears about AIDS. Many children worry that they will catch AIDS and die. Help them learn that unless they use IV drugs or have sexual intercourse, it's almost impossible for them to get AIDS.



- “You are healthy, and I’m going to help you stay healthy by teaching you to make smart choices.”

**5th-6th graders are beginning to understand cause and effect.**

- Encourage them to talk about their feelings and what they understand about AIDS.
- Help them learn the basic facts about AIDS.
- Help them learn how the disease can be transferred from person to person.



**7th-12th graders vary greatly in their maturity level — but almost all believe that bad things can never happen to them.**

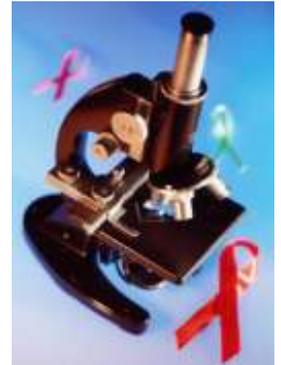
- Talk with them regularly — about everything, including sexuality and AIDS.
- Listen, listen, listen. What are their feelings, what are they concerned about?
- Help them learn detailed information about how AIDS is spread, including how to protect themselves against getting it.

**The Facts About AIDS**

AIDS stands for Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome. AIDS is a group of diseases that damage the immune system. People with AIDS get infections that normal immune systems ward off.

AIDS is very hard to combat because the HIV virus (the human immunodeficiency virus) attacks cells and turns them into factories to produce more HIV virus cells.

It is hard to find a vaccine for AIDS because the HIV virus can keep changing itself.



**People infected with the HIV virus are probably infected for life.**

Once they have the virus, they can infect other people. Most people will develop full blown AIDS symptoms within 5-10 years after being infected.

**Experts believe you cannot get AIDS from the air, water, or food.**

- AIDS does not seem to be spread by sneezing, coughing, hugging or kissing (unless both people have bleeding sores or gums), touching something used by an infected person, being bitten by an insect, or living with a person who has AIDS.

**The HIV virus is fragile and not easily spread. It goes from one person to another through blood, semen, vaginal fluid or breast milk. These are the ways a person can get the virus:**

- By exchanging items that could have blood on them (needles, toothbrushes or razors).
- By being born with it.
- By having any type of unprotected sexual intercourse.
- By receiving a blood transfusion before 1985.

**What does a person look like when they have AIDS?**

- You can't tell just by looking at a person if they have the AIDS virus. A blood test can tell whether a person has been infected with the HIV virus. For more information, click on [www.cdc.gov/hiv](http://www.cdc.gov/hiv)

## How can a person avoid getting AIDS?

- **Don't become sexually active.** Help your children build their self esteem and their peer pressure resistance skills. Help them to learn to:
  - Just say, "No."
  - Just say, "Not now."
  - Just say, "Not today."
  - Just say, "Not with you!"
- **Use condoms when sexually active.** Latex condoms do not take away all the risk of sexual intercourse, but they make it safer. Condoms have to be put on correctly, and teens may be slopping about this.
- **Do NOT have sex with people at high risk of developing AIDS.**
  - These include:
    - people who may have been infected with the AIDS virus.
    - people who have had unprotected sexual intercourse with more than one partner.
    - people who use IV drugs or people who have had sex with IV drug users.
- **The CDC tells people to remember the ABC's.**
  - A = Abstinence
  - B = Be Faithful
  - C = Condoms
- **Education is our most important weapon in the battle against AIDS.** Parents are the most powerful force in helping children shape their values. Help do your part. Talk with your children today about this disease.
- **Be an "askable parent."** Answer questions honestly. If you don't know the answer, look it up together.
  - When you talk with your children about sexuality, you are showing them how much you care about them.
  - You may already know someone with AIDS. If not, sooner or later, you will. Here are some tips for understanding and helping other families who are coping with AIDS.

- **Families of people with AIDS may face many of the following challenges:**

- Adjusting to the life—threatening diagnosis of someone they love.
- Dealing with their fears of contracting AIDS.
- Accepting the disclosure of a family member’s gay identity and/or drug use.
- Becoming aware of the stigmas/stereotypes against those who have AIDS.
- Accepting that their child is/was sexually active.
- Managing conflict within the family.
- Beginning to grieve.
- Providing emotional support and physical care to the ill member.
- Managing the multiple difficulties of the health care system.



- **There are some ways you can help.**

- Don’t ask the family how the disease was contracted. Control your curiosity and provide helpful support.
- Express compassion and withhold judgment of the ill person. Extend your concern and support to all significant people in the life of the person with AIDS.
- Let the family know that you care and that you are ready to listen if they need someone to talk to.
- Remember that many people with AIDS are young. Their illness and death are out of step with the expected life cycle. Children die before parents; parents die leaving young children; and several people in the same family network sometimes die in the same time period. Community support groups for survivors may help them go on with their lives.



Most important, be aware that families of people with AIDS are families in grief. Grief is a long and difficult process which generally begins long before the anticipated death occurs.

The single most helpful gesture you can make for someone in grief is to allow that person to express pain. Try not to say or do anything that will close off such expression. It is almost always best simply to be present for the other person. Richard Kalish, a well-known author on grief-related topics, said it like this, “Don’t just do something. Stand there!”

I hope this information is helpful.

Have a good month!

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